

Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee

VA



U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Veterans Health Administration
Office of Rural Health

INFORMATION SHEET

In 2008, The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) chartered the Veterans Rural Health Advisory Committee (VRHAC) to “advise the Secretary accordingly on health care issues that affect Veterans residing in rural areas.” Members meet as necessary with rural subject-matter experts at the federal, state and local levels to discuss programs and policies that impact the provision of VA health care to rural Veterans. VRHAC members:



Examine ways to enhance or improve VA services for rural Veterans by assessing the current rural environment, existing health care opportunities, and challenges or barriers to access



Recommend solutions to the Secretary designed to enhance or improve VA rural health care services for Veterans

The 12 appointed VRHAC members include Veterans; leaders of local, state and national-level rural health organizations; representatives of Veterans Service Organizations; researchers; and other rural health stakeholders. These meetings offer members a forum to study emerging trends and discuss new ideas to increase rural Veterans’ access to health care services. Led by the Committee Chair, members work throughout the year to understand how the rural health landscape is changing for Veterans. Each year, members convene to collect and share information, hear national policy updates, and engage with other experts.

The Committee also works to see how national policy, health care and services work at the local level. VRHAC members have participated in rural site visits to engage with Veterans in town hall meetings, tour VA and community health care facilities and mobile clinics, meet with local Veteran Service Organization (VSO) leaders, hear expert presentations, and see technologies and programs at work. The Committee uses these visits to identify barriers to care and to elevate successful initiatives.

Past committee visits include:

**Augusta, Maine
Chillicothe, Ohio
Helena, Montana
Spokane, Washington**

**Johnson City, Tennessee
Morgantown, West Virginia
Phoenix, Arizona
Biloxi, Mississippi**

**Reno, Nevada
Salt Lake City, Utah
Uvalde, Texas
Iowa City, Iowa**

A Think Tank for Veterans and Rural Health Access Issues

VRHAC’s recommendations highlight the importance of understanding the rural Veteran population, the potential of health care technology, and opportunities for local collaboration. Currently the Committee is investigating solutions to the challenges rural women Veterans face in accessing quality health care. Previous recommendations centered on expanding rural transportation access, developing peer and social support groups, and increasing VA enrollment of rural women Veterans.



RURAL TRANSPORTATION ACCESS

Expand highly rural transportation grant program to include more Veterans in rural designated areas.

- ▶ The current grant program only covers areas considered “highly rural,” but not areas considered “rural.”
- ▶ This expansion would provide more rural Veterans with the resources to travel to nearby medical facilities, which will increase their access to VHA services.



PEER AND SOCIAL SUPPORT GROUPS

Engage rural women Veterans to develop at least one peer or social support group in each VISN; consider using Community Veterans Engagement Board (CVEB).

- ▶ The widespread nature of rural communities and small population size can cause feelings of loneliness and isolation.
- ▶ These support groups can foster a sense of community among rural women Veterans and help them form meaningful connections with peers who can be sources of support through mental and physical health struggles.



RURAL WOMEN VETERANS

Support initiatives to increase enrollment of rural women Veterans.

- ▶ Many women Veterans are not aware of their Veteran status or eligibility to enroll in VA care.
- ▶ Educational outreach should be conducted in the form of marketing campaigns and community level engagement efforts to inform rural women Veterans of the resources available to them.

Committee Member Nominations

Appointments to VRHAC rotate and are term limited. Members serve an initial two or three-year term, and the Secretary may reappoint members for an additional term of service. Committee members are expected to attend all meetings and to contribute their time and expertise to Committee projects. ORH actively seeks nominations for new members throughout the year. Submit third-party or self-nominations, including a letter of interest, letters of recommendations and a resume to rural.health.inquiry@va.gov.

The Office of Rural Health (ORH) works to see that America’s Veterans thrive in rural communities. To support the health and well-being of rural Veterans, ORH and its Veterans Rural Health Resource Centers establish and disseminate initiatives that increase access to care for the 2.7 million rural Veterans enrolled in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ health care system. Key focus areas include programs that address workforce shortages, transportation, primary care, mental health, telehealth and specialty care. To learn more, visit www.ruralhealth.va.gov.